THE

STORY

OF

FLAVILLA.

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MDCCLXXVI.

FLAVILLA.

FLAVILLA, juſt as ſhe had entered her fourteenth year, was left an orphan to the care of her mother, in ſuch circumſtances as diſappointed all the hopes which her education had encouraged. Her father, who lived in great elegance upon the ſalary of a place at court, died ſuddenly, without having made any proviſion for his family, except an annuity of one hundred pounds, which he had purchaſed for his wife with part of her marriage portion, nor was he poſſeſſed of any property, except the furniture of a large houſe in one of the new ſquares, an equipage, a few jewels, and ſome plate.

The greateſt part of the furniture and the equipage were ſold to pay his debts; the jewels which were not of great value, and ſome uſeful pieces of the plate, were

reſerved; and Flavilla removed with her mother into lodgings.

But notwithſtanding this change in their circumſtances, they did not immediately loſe their rank. They were ſtill viſited by a numerous and polite acquaintance; and though ſome gratified their pride by aſſuming an appearance of pity, and rather inſulted than alleviated their diſtreſs by the whine of condolance, and a minute compariſon of what they had loſt with what they had poſſeſſed; yet from others they were continually receiving preſents, which ſtill enabled them to live with a genteel frugality; they were ſtill conſidered as people of faſhion, and treated by thoſe of a lower claſs with diſtant reſpect.

Flavilla thus continued to move in a ſphere to which ſhe had no claim; ſhe was perpetually ſurrounded with elegance and ſplendour, which the caprice of others, like the rod of an enchanter, could diſſipate in a moment, and leave her to regret the loſs of enjoyments, which ſhe could neither hope to obtain nor ceaſe to deſire. Of this, however, Flavilla had no dread. She was remarkably tall for her age, and was celebrated, not only

for her beauty, but her wit: theſe qualifications ſhe conſidered, not only as ſecuring whatever ſhe enjoyed by the favour of others, but as a pledge of poſſeſſing them in her own right, by an advantageous marriage. Thus the viſion that danced before her, derived ſtability from the very vanity which it flattered; and ſhe had as little apprehenſion of diſtreſs, as diffidence of her own power to pleaſe.

There was a faſhionable levity in her carriage and diſcourſe, which her mother, who knew the danger of her ſituation, laboured to reſtrain, ſometimes with anger, and ſometimes with tears, but always without ſucceſs. Flavilla was ever ready to anſwer, that ſhe neither did or ſaid any thing of which ſhe had reaſon to be aſhamed; and therefore did not know why ſhe ſhould be reſtrained, except in mere courteſy to envy whom it was an honour to provoke, or to ſlander whom it was a diſgrace to fear. In proportion as Flavilla was more flattered and careſſed, the influence of her mother became leſs; and though ſhe always treated her with reſpect, from a point of good breeding, yet ſhe ſecretly deſpiſed her maxims and applauded her own conduct.

Flavilla, at eighteen, was a celebrated toaſt; and among other gay viſitants who frequented her tea-table, was Clodio, a young baronet, who had juſt taken poſſeſſion of his title and eſtate. There were many particulars in Clodio's behaviour, which encouraged Flavilla to hope that ſhe ſhould obtain him for a huſband: but ſhe ſuffered his aſſiduities with ſuch apparent pleaſure, and his familiarities with ſo little reſerve, that he ſoon ventured to diſcloſe his intention, and make her, what he thought, a very genteel propoſal of another kind: but whatever were the artifices with which it was introduced, or the terms in which it was made, Flavilla rejected it with the utmoſt indignation and diſdain. Clodio, who, notwithſtanding his youth, had long known and often practiſed the arts of ſeduction, gave way to the ſtorm, threw himſelf at her feet, imputed his offence to the phrenzy of his paſſion, flattered her pride by the moſt abject ſubmiſſion and extravagant praiſe, intreated her pardon, aggravated his crime, but made no mention of atonement by marriage. This particular, which Flavilla did not fail to remark, ought to have determined her to admit him no more: but her vanity and ambition were ſtill predominant, ſhe

ſtill

ſtill hoped to ſucceed in her project. Clodio's offence was tacitly forgiven, his viſits were permitted, his familiarities were again ſuffered, and his hopes revived. He had long entertained an opinion that ſhe loved him, in which, however, it is probable that his own vanity and her indiſcretion concurred to deceive him; but this opinion, though it implied the ſtrongeſt obligation to treat her with generoſity and tenderneſs, only determined him again to attempt her ruin, as it encouraged him with a probability of ſucceſs. Having, therefore, reſolved to obtain her as a miſtreſs, or at once to give her up, he thought he had little more to do, than to convince her that he had taken ſuch a reſolution, juſtify it by ſome plauſible ſophiſtry, and give her ſome time to deliberate upon a final determination. With this view he went a ſhort journey into the country; having put a letter into her hand at parting, in which he acquainted her, that he had often reflected, with inexpreſſible regret, upon her reſentment of his conduct in a late inſtance; but that the delicacy and the ardour of his affection were inſuperable obſtacles to his marriage; that where there was no liberty there could be no happineſs; that he ſhould become in-

different to the endearments of love, when they could no longer be diſtinguiſhed from the officiouſneſs of duty; that while they were happy in the poſſeſſion of each other, it would be abſurd to ſuppoſe they would part; and, that if this happineſs ſhould ceaſe, it would not only enſure but aggravate their miſery to be inſeparably united: that this event was leſs probable, in proportion as their cohabitation was voluntary; but that he would make ſuch proviſion for her upon the contingency as a wife would expect upon his death. He conjured her not to determine under the influence of prejudice and cuſtom, but according to the laws of reaſon and nature. After mature deliberation, ſaid he, remember that the whole value of my life depends upon your will. I do not requeſt an explicit conſent, with whatever tranſport I might behold the lovely confuſion which it might produce. I ſhall attend you in a few days, with the anxiety, tho' not with the guilt of a criminal, who waits for the deciſion of his judge. If my viſit is admitted, we will never part; if it is rejected, I can ſee you no more.

Flavilla had too much underſtanding as well as virtue, to deliberate a moment upon this

this propoſal. She gave immediate orders that Clodio ſhould be admitted no more. But his letter was a temptation to gratify her vanity, which ſhe could not reſiſt; ſhe ſhewed it firſt to her mother, and then to the whole circle of her female acquaintance with all the exultation of a hero who expoſes a vanquiſhed enemy at the wheels of his chariot in a triumph; ſhe conſidered it as indiſputable evidence of her virtue, as a reproof of all who had dared to cenſure the levity of her conduct, and a licence to continue it without apology or reſtraint.

It happened that Flavilla, ſoon after this accident, was ſeen in one of the boxes at the play-houſe by Mercator, a young gentleman who had juſt returned from his firſt voyage as captain of a large ſhip in the Levant trade, which had been purchaſed for him by his father, whoſe fortune enabled him to make a genteel proviſion for five ſons, of whom Mercator was the youngeſt, and who expected to ſhare his eſtate, which was perſonal, in equal proportions at his death.

Mercator was captivated with her beauty, but diſcouraged by the ſplendor of her appearance, and the rank of her company.

He was urged rather by curioſity than hope, to enquire who ſhe was; and he ſoon gained ſuch a knowledge of her circumſtances, as relieved him from deſpair. As he knew not how to get admiſſion to her company, and had no deſign upon her virtue, he wrote in the firſt ardor of his paſſion to her mother; giving a faithful account of his fortune and dependance, and entreating that he might be permitted to viſit Flavilla as a candidate for her affection. The old lady, after having made ſome enquiries, by which the account that Mercator had given her was confirmed, ſent him an invitation, and received his firſt viſit alone. She told him, that as Flavilla had no fortune, and as a conſiderable part of his own was dependant upon his father's will, it would be extremely imprudent to endanger the diſappointment of his expectations, by a marriage, which would make it more neceſſary that they ſhould be fulfilled; that he ought, therefore, to obtain his father's conſent, before any other ſtep was taken, leſt he ſhould be embarraſſed by engagements which young perſons almoſt inſenſibly contract, whoſe complacency in each other is continually gaining ſtrength by frequent viſits and converſation. To this counſel, ſo ſalutary and perplexing, Mercator

cator was heſitating what to reply, when Flavilla came in, an accident which he was now only ſolicitous to improve. Flavilla was not diſpleaſed either with his perſon or his addreſs; the frankneſs and gaiety of her diſpoſition ſoon made him forget that he was a ſtranger; a converſation commenced, during which they became yet more pleaſed with each other; and having thus ſurmounted the difficulty of a firſt viſit, he thought no more of the old lady, as he believed her auſpices were not neceſſary to his ſucceſs.

His viſits were often repeated, and he became every hour more impatient of delay: he preſſed his ſuit with that contagious ardor, which is caught at every glance, and produces the conſent which it ſolicits. At the ſame time, indeed, a thought of his father would intervene; but being determined to gratify his wiſhes at all events, he concluded with a ſagacity almoſt univerſal on theſe occaſions, that, of two evils, to marry without his conſent was leſs, than to marry againſt it; and one evening, after the lovers had ſpent the afternoon by themſelves, they went out in a kind of frolic, which Mercator had propoſed in the vehemence of his paſſion, and to which Fla-

villa had conſented in the giddineſs of her indiſcretion, and were married at May-fair.

In the firſt interval of recollection after this precipitant ſtep, Mercator conſidered, that he ought to be the firſt who acquainted his father of the new alliance which had been made in his family: but as he had not fortitude enough to do it in perſon he expreſſed it in the beſt terms he could conceive by a letter; and after ſuch an apology for his conduct as he had been uſed to make to himſelf, he requeſted he might be permitted to preſent his wife for the parental benediction, which alone was wanting to compleat his felicity.

The old gentleman, whoſe character I cannot better expreſs than in the faſhionable phraſe which has been contrived to palliate falſe principles and diſſolute manners, had been a gay man, and was well acquainted with the town. He had often heard Flavilla toaſted by rakes of quality, and often ſeen her at public places. Her beauty and her dependance, the gaiety of her dreſs, the multitude of her admirers, the levity of her conduct, and all the circumſtances of her ſituation, had concurred to render her character ſuſpected; and he was diſpoſed to judge

judge of it with yet leſs charity, when ſhe had offended him by marrying his ſon, whom he conſidered as diſgraced and impoveriſhed, and whoſe misfortune, as it was irretrievable, he reſolved not to alleviate, but to encreaſe; a reſolution, by which fathers, who have fooliſh and diſobedient ſons, uſually diſplay their own kindneſs and wiſdom. As ſoon as he had read Mercator's letter, he curſed him for a fool, who had been gulled by the artifices of a ſtrumpet to ſcreen her from public infamy by fathering her children, and ſecure her from a priſon by appropriating her debts. In an anſwer to his letter, which he wrote only to gratify his reſentment, he told him, that if he had taken Flavilla into keeping, he would have overlooked it; and if her extravagance had diſtreſſed him, he would have ſatisfied his creditors; but that his marriage was not to be forgiven; that he never ſhould have another ſhilling of his money; and that he was determined to ſee him no more. Mercator, who was more provoked by this outrage than grieved at his loſs, diſdained to reply; and believing that he had now moſt reaſon to be offended, could not be perſuaded to ſolicit a reconciliation.

He hired a genteel apartment for his wife of an upholſterer, who, with a view

to

to let lodgings, had taken and furniſhed a large houſe near *Leiceſter-Fields*, and in about two months left her to make another voyage.

He had received viſits of congratulation from her numerous acquaintance, and had returned them as a pledge of his deſire that they ſhould be repeated. But a remembrance of the gay multitude, which while he was at home had flattered his vanity, as ſoon as he was abſent alarmed his ſuſpicion: he had, indeed, no particular cauſe of jealouſy; but his anxiety aroſe merely from a a ſenſe of the temptation to which ſhe was expoſed, and the impoſſibility of his ſuperintending her conduct.

In the mean time Flavilla continued to flutter round the ſame giddy circle, in which ſhe had ſhone ſo long; the number of her viſitants was rather increaſed than diminiſhed, the gentlemen attended with yet greater aſſiduity, and ſhe continued to encourage their civilities by the ſame indiſcreet familiarity; ſhe was one night at the maſquerade, and another at an opera; ſometimes at a rout, and ſometimes rambling with a party of pleaſure, in ſhort excurſions from town; ſhe came home ſome-

ſometimes at midnight, ſometimes in the morning, and ſometimes ſhe was abſent ſeveral nights together.

This conduct was the cauſe of much ſpeculation and uneaſineſs to the good man and woman of the houſe. At firſt they ſuſpected that Flavilla was no better than a woman of pleaſure; and that the perſon who had hired the lodging for her as his wife, and had diſappeared upon pretence of a voyage to ſea, had been employed to impoſe upon them, by concealing her character, in order to obtain ſuch accommodation for her as ſhe could not ſo eaſily have procured if it had been known; but as theſe ſuſpicions made them watchful and inquiſitive, they ſoon diſcovered that many ladies by whom ſhe was viſited were of good character and faſhion. Her conduct, however, ſuppoſing her to be a wife, was ſtill inexcuſable, and ſtill endangered their credit and ſubſiſtance; hints were often dropped to the diſadvantage of her character; and an elderly maiden lady, who lodged in the ſecond floor had given warning; the family was diſturbed at all hours in the night, and the door was crowded all day with meſſages to Flavilla.

One day, therefore, the good woman took an opportunity to remonſtrate, though in the moſt diſtant and reſpectful terms, and with the utmoſt diffidence and caution. She told Flavilla, that ſhe was a fine young lady, that her huſband was abroad, that ſhe kept a great deal of company, and that the world was cenſorious; ſhe wiſhed that leſs occaſion for ſcandal was given; and hoped to be excuſed the liberty ſhe had taken, as ſhe might be ruined by thoſe ſlanders which could have no influence upon the great, and which, therefore, they were not ſolicitous to avoid. This addreſs, however ambiguous, and however gentle, was eaſily underſtood, and fiercely reſented. Flavilla, proud of her virtue, and impatient of controul, would have deſpiſed the counſel of a philoſopher, if it had implied an impeachment of her conduct; before a perſon ſo much her inferior, therefore, ſhe was under no reſtraint; ſhe anſwered with a mixture of contempt and indignation, that thoſe only who did not know her, would dare to take any liberty with her character; and warned her to propagate no ſcandalous report at her peril. Flavilla immediately roſe from her ſeat, and the woman departed without reply, though ſhe was ſcarce leſs offended than her lodger, and from that moment ſhe deter-

determined when Mercator returned to give him warning.

Mercator's voyage was proſperous; and after an abſence of about Ten months he came back. The woman, to whom her huſband left the whole management of the lodgings, and who perſiſted in her purpoſe, ſoon found an opportunity to put it in execution. Mercator, as his part of the contract had been punctually fulfilled, thought he had ſome cauſe to be offended, and inſiſted to know her reaſons for compelling him to leave her houſe. Theſe, his hoſteſs, who was indeed a friendly woman, was very unwilling to give; and as he perceived that ſhe evaded his queſtion, he became more ſolicitous to obtain an anſwer. After much heſitation, which perhaps had a worſe effect than any tale which malice could have invented, ſhe told him, that Madam kept a great deal of company, and often ſtaid out very late; that ſhe had always been uſed to quiet and regularity, and was determined to let her apartments to ſome perſon in a more private ſtation.

At this account Mercator changed countenance for he inferred from it juſt as much more than truth, as he believed it to be leſs.

After

After ſome moments of ſuſpence, he conjured her to conceal nothing from him, with an emotion that convinced her that ſhe had already ſaid too much. She then aſſured him, that he had no reaſon to be alarmed; for that ſhe had no exception to his Lady, but thoſe gaieties which her ſtation, and the faſhion ſufficiently authoriſed. Mercator's ſuſpicions, however, were not wholly removed; and he began to think he had found a confidante whom it would be his intereſt to truſt: he therefore, in the folly of his jealouſy, confeſſed, that he had ſome doubts concerning his wife, which it was of the utmoſt importance to his honour and his peace to reſolve: he intreated that he might continue in the apartment another year, that, as he ſhould again leave the kingdom in a ſhort time, ſhe would ſuffer no incident, which might confirm either his hopes or his fears, to eſcape her notice in his abſence; and that at his return ſhe would give him ſuch an account as would at leaſt deliver him from the torment of ſuſpence, and determine his future conduct.

There is no ſophiſtry more general, than that by which we juſtify a buſy and ſcrupulous enquiry after ſecrets, which to diſcover

cover is to be wretched without hope of redreſs; and no ſervice to which others are ſo eaſily engaged as to aſſiſt in the ſearch. To communicate ſuſpicions of matrimonial infidelity, eſpecially to a huſband, is, by a ſtrange mixture of folly and malignity, deem'd not only an act of juſtice but of friendſhip; though it is too late to prevent an evil, which, whatever be its guilt, can diffuſe wretchedneſs only in proportion as it is known. It is no wonder, therefore, that the general kindneſs of Mercator's confidante was on this occaſion overborne; ſhe was flatter'd by the truſt that had been placed in her, and the power with which ſhe was inveſted; ſhe conſented to Mercator's propoſal; and promiſed, that ſhe would with the utmoſt fidelity execute her commiſſion.

Mercator, however, conceal'd his ſuſpicions from his wife; and, indeed, in her preſence they were forgotten. Her manner of life he began ſeriouſly to diſapprove; but being well acquainted with her temper, in which great ſweetneſs was blended with a high ſpirit, he would not embitter the pleaſure of a ſhort ſtay by altercation, chiding and tears: but when her mind was melted into tenderneſs at his departure, he claſped her in an exſtacy of fondneſs to his boſom, and intreated her to behave with

reſerve

reſerve and circumſpection; becauſe, ſaid he, I know that my father keeps a watchful eye upon your conduct, which may, therefore, confirm or remove his diſpleaſure, and either intercept or beſtow ſuch an encreaſe of my fortune as will prevent the pangs of ſeparation which muſt otherwiſe ſo often return, and in a ſhort time unite us to part no more. To this caution ſhe had then no power to reply; and they parted with mutual proteſtations of unalterable love.

Flavilla, ſoon after ſhe was thus left in a kind of widowhood a ſecond time, found herſelf with child; and within ſomewhat leſs than eight months after Mercator's return from his firſt voyage, ſhe happen'd to ſtumble as ſhe was going up ſtairs, and being immediately taken ill was brought to bed before the next morning, The child, tho' its birth had been precipitated more than a month, was not remarkably ſmall, nor had any infirmity which endanger'd its life.

It was now neceſſary that the vigils of whiſt, and the tumults of balls and viſits ſhould, for a while, be ſuſpended; and in this interval of languor and retirement

Flavilla

Flavilla firſt became thoughtful. She often reflected upon Mercator's caution when they laſt parted, which had made an indelible impreſſion upon her mind, though it had produced no alteration in her conduct: notwithſtanding the manner in which it was expreſſed, and the reaſon upon which it was founded, ſhe began to fear that it might have been ſecretly prompted by jealouſy. The birth, therefore, of her firſt child in his abſence, at a time when, if it had not been premature it could not poſſibly have been his, was an accident which greatly alarmed her: but there was yet another, for which it was ſtill leſs in her power to account, and which, therefore, alarmed her ſtill more.

It happened that ſome civilities which ſhe received from a Lady who ſat next her at an opera, and whom ſhe had never ſeen before, introduced a converſation, which ſo much delighted her, that ſhe gave her a preſſing invitation to viſit her: this invitation was accepted, and in a few days the viſit was paid, Flavilla was not leſs pleaſed at the ſecond interview than ſhe had been at the firſt; and without making any other enquiry concerning the Lady than where ſhe lived, took the firſt opportunity to wait on her. The apartment in which ſhe was received

was

was the ground floor of an elegant houſe, at a ſmall diſtance from St. James's. It happened that Flavilla was placed near the window; and a party of the horſe-guards riding through the ſtreet, ſhe expected to ſee ſome of the royal family, and haſtily threw up the ſaſh. A gentleman who was paſſing by at the ſame inſtant, turned about at the noiſe of the window, and Flavilla no ſooner ſaw his face than ſhe knew him to be the father of Mercator. After looking firſt ſtedfaſtly at her, and then glancing his eye at the lady whom ſhe was viſiting, he affected a contemptuous ſneer and went on. Flavilla, who had been thrown into ſome confuſion by the ſudden and unexpected ſight of a perſon whom ſhe knew conſidered her as the diſgrace of his family and the ruin of his child, now changed countenance, and haſtily retired to another part of the room: ſhe was touched both with grief and anger at this ſilent inſult, of which, however, ſhe did not then ſuſpect the cauſe. It is, indeed, probable, that the father of Mercator would no where have looked upon her with complacency; but as ſoon as he ſaw her companion, he recollected that ſhe was the favourite miſtreſs of an old courtier, and that this was the houſe in which he

he kept her in great ſplendour, though ſhe had been by turns a proſtitute to many others. It happened that Flavilla, ſoon after this accident, diſcovered the character of her new acquaintance, and never remembered by whom ſhe had been ſeen in her company, without the utmoſt regret and apprehenſion.

She now reſolved to move in a leſs circle, and with more circumſpection. In the mean time her little boy, whom ſhe ſuckled, grew very faſt; and it could no longer be known by his appearance, that he had been born too ſoon. His mother frequently gazed at him till her eyes overflowed with tears; and though her pleaſures were now become domeſtic, yet ſhe feared leſt that which had produced ſhould deſtroy them. After much deliberation, ſhe determined that ſhe would conceal the child's age from its father, believing it prudent to prevent a ſuſpicion, which, however ill founded, it might be difficult to remove, as her juſtification would depend wholly upon the teſtimony of her dependants; and her mother's and her own would neceſſarily become doubtful, when every one would have reaſon to conclude, that it would

would ſtill have been the ſame, ſuppoſing the contrary to have been true.

Such was the ſtate of Flavilla's mind, and her little boy was ſix months old when Mercator returned. She received him with joy, indeed, but it was mixed with a viſible confuſion; their meeting was more tender, but on her part it was leſs chearful; ſhe ſmiled with inexpreſſible complacency, but at the ſame time the tears guſhed from her eyes, and ſhe was ſeized with an univerſal tremor. Mercator caught the infection, and careſſed firſt his Flavilla, and then his boy, with an exceſs of fondneſs and delight that before he had never expreſſed. The ſight of the child made him more than ever wiſh a reconciliation with his father; and having heard at his firſt landing, that he was dangerouſly ill, he determined to go immediately and attempt to ſee him, promiſing to return to ſupper. He had, in the midſt of his careſſes, more than once enquired the age of his ſon, but the queſtion had been always evaded, of which, however, he took no notice, nor did it produce any ſuſpicion.

He was now haſting to enquire after his father; but as he paſſed through the hall

hall, he was officiouſly laid hold of by his landlady. He was not much diſpoſed to enquire how ſhe had fulfilled his charge; but perceiving by her looks that ſhe had ſomething to communicate, which was, at leaſt in her own opinion, of importance, he ſuffered her to take him into the parlour. She immediately ſhut the door, and reminded him, that ſhe had undertaken an office with reluctance which he had preſſed upon her; and that ſhe had done nothing in it to which he had not bound her by a promiſe; that ſhe was extremely ſorry to communicate her diſcoveries; but that he was a worthy gentleman, and indeed, ought to know them. She then told him, that the child was born within leſs than eight months after his laſt return from abroad; that it was ſaid to have come before its time, but that having preſſed to ſee it ſhe was refuſed. This, indeed, was true, and confirmed the good woman in her ſuſpicions; for Flavilla, who had ſtill reſented the freedom which ſhe had taken in her remonſtrance, had kept her at a great diſtance; and the ſervants to gratify the miſtreſs, treated her with the utmoſt inſolence and contempt.

At this relation Mercator turned pale. He now recollected, that his queſtion con-

cerning the child's birth had been evaded; and concluded, that he had been ſhedding tears of tenderneſs and joy over a ſtrumpet and a baſtard, who had robbed him of his patrimony, his honour and his peace. He ſtarted up with the furious wildneſs of ſudden phrenzy; but ſhe with great difficulty prevailed upon him not to leave the room. He ſat down and remained ſome time motionleſs, with his eyes fixed on the ground, and his hands locked in each other. In proportion as he believed his wife to be guilty, his tenderneſs for his father revived; and he reſolved, with yet greater zeal, to proſecute his purpoſe of immediately attempting a reconciliation. In this ſtate of confuſion and diſtreſs, he went to the houſe; where he learned that his father had died early in the morning, and that his relations were then aſſembled to read his will. Fulvius, a brother of Mercator's mother, with whom he had always been a favorite, happening to paſs from one room to another, heard his voice. He accoſted him with great ardour of friendſhip; and, ſoothing him with expreſſions of condolance and affection, inſiſted to introduce him to the company. Mercator tacitly conſented: he was received at leaſt with civility by his brothers, and ſitting down among them,

the will was read. He ſeemed to liſten like the reſt; but was indeed muſing over the ſtory which he had juſt heard, and loſt in the ſpeculation of his own wretchedneſs. He waked as from a dream, when the voice of the perſon who had been reading was ſuſpended; and finding that he could no longer contain himſelf, he ſtarted up and would have left the company.

Of the will which had been read before him he knew nothing: but his uncle believing that he was moved with grief and reſentment at the manner in which he had been mentioned in it, and the bequeſt only of a ſhilling, took him into another room; and, to apologize for his father's unkindneſs, told him, that the reſentment which he expreſſed at his marriage, was every day encreaſed by the conduct of his wife, whoſe character was now become notoriouſly infamous; for that ſhe had been ſeen at the lodgings of a known proſtitute, with whom ſhe appeared to be well acquainted. This account threw Mercator into another agony; from which he was, however, at length recover'd by his uncle, who, as the only expedient by which he could retrieve his misfortune and ſooth his diſtreſs, propoſed that he ſhould no more return to his lodg-

ings but go home with him; and that he would himſelf take ſuch meaſures with his wife, as could ſcarce fail of inducing her to accept a ſeperate maintenance, aſſume another name, and trouble him no more. Mercator, in the bitterneſs of his affliction, conſented to this propoſal, and they went away together.

Mercator in the mean time, was expected by Flavilla with the moſt tender impatience. She had put her little boy to bed, and decorated a ſmall room in which they had been uſed to ſup by themſelves, and which ſhe had ſhut up in his abſence; ſhe counted the moments as they paſſed, and liſtened to every carriage and every ſtep that ſhe heard. Supper was now ready: her impatience was increaſed; terror was at length mingled with regret, and her fondneſs was only buſied to afflict her; ſhe wiſhed, ſhe feared, ſhe accuſed, ſhe apologized, and ſhe wept. In the height of theſe eager expectations and this tender diſtreſs, ſhe received a billet which Mercator had been perſuaded by his uncle to write, in which he upbraided her in the ſtrongeſt terms with abuſing his confidence and diſhonouring his bed; "of this," he ſaid, "he had now obtained ſufficient proof

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to do juſtice to himſelf, and that he was determined to ſee her no more."

To thoſe whoſe hearts have not already acquainted them with the agony which ſeized Flavilla upon the ſight of this billet, all attempts to deſcribe it would be not only ineffectual but abſurd. Having paſſed the night without ſleep, and the next day without food, diſappointed in every attempt to diſcover what was become of Mercaor, and doubting, if ſhe ſhould have found him, whether it would be poſſible to convince him of her innocence; the violent agitation of her mind produced a ſlow fever, which, before ſhe conſidered it as a diſeaſe, ſhe communicated to the child while ſhe cheriſhed it at her boſom, and wept over it as an orphan whoſe life ſhe was ſuſtaining with her own.

After Mercator had been abſent about ten days, his uncle, having perſuaded him to accompany ſome friends to a country ſeat at the diſtance of near ſixty miles, went to his lodgings in order to diſcharge the rent, and try what terms he could make with Flavilla, whom he hoped to intimidate with threats of a proſecution and divorce; but when he came he found that Flavilla was

ſinking very faſt under her diſeaſe, and that the child was dead already. The woman of the houſe, into whoſe hands ſhe had juſt put her repeating watch and ſome other ornaments as a ſecurity for her rent, was ſo touched with her diſtreſs, and ſo firmly perſuaded of her innocence by the manner in which ſhe had addreſſed her, and the calm ſolemnity with which ſhe abſolved thoſe by whom ſhe had been traduced, that as ſoon as ſhe diſcovered Fulvius's buſineſs, ſhe threw herſelf on her knees, and intreated, that if he knew where Mercator was to be found, he would urge him to return, that if poſſible the life of Flavilla might be preſerved, and the happineſs of both be reſtored by her juſtification. Fulvius, who ſtill ſuſpected appearances, or at leaſt was in doubt of the cauſe that had produced them, would not diſcover his nephew; but after much entreaty and expoſtulation at laſt engaged upon his honour for the conveyance of a letter. The woman, as ſoon as ſhe had obtained this promiſe, ran up and communicated it to Flavilla; who, when ſhe had recover'd from the ſurprize and tumult which it occaſioned, was ſupported in her bed, and in about half an hour, after many efforts and many intervals, wrote a ſhort billet, which was ſealed and put into the hands of Fulvius.

Fulvius

Fulvius immediately incloſed and diſpatched it by the poſt, reſolving that, in a queſtion ſo doubtful and of ſuch importance, he would no farther interpoſe. Mercator, who the moment he caſt his eye upon the letter knew both the hand and ſeal, after pauſing a few moments in ſuſpence, at length tore it open, and read theſe words,

"Such has been my folly, that, perhaps, "I ſhould not be acquitted of guilt in any "circumſtances, but thoſe in which I "write. I do not, therefore, but for your "ſake wiſh them other than they are. "The dear infant, whoſe birth has undone "me, now lies dead at my ſide, a victim "to my indiſcretion and your reſentment. "I am ſcarce able to guide my pen. But "I moſt earneſtly entreat to ſee you, that "you may at leaſt have the ſatisfaction to "hear me atteſt my innocence with the laſt "ſigh, and ſeal our reconciliation on my "lips while they are yet ſenſible of the "impreſſion."

Mercator, whom an earthquake would leſs have affected than this letter, felt all his tenderneſs revive in a moment, and reflected with unutterable anguiſh upon the raſhneſs of his reſentment. At the thought of his diſtance from London, he ſtarted as

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if he had felt a dagger in his heart: he lifted up his eyes to heaven, with a look that expreſſed at once an accuſation of himſelf and a petition for her; and then ruſhing out of the houſe, without taking leave of any, or ordering a ſervant to attend him, he took poſt-horſes at the neighbouring inn, and in leſs than ſix hours was in Leiceſter-fields. But, notwithſtanding his ſpeed, he arrived too late; Flavilla had ſuffered the laſt agony, and her eyes could behold him no more. Grief and diſappointment, remorſe and diſpair now totally ſubverted his reaſon. It became neceſſary to remove him by force from the body; and after a confinement of two years in a mad-houſe he died.

May every lady, on whoſe memory compaſſion ſhall record theſe events, tremble to aſſume the levity of Flavilla; for, perhaps, it is in the power of no man in Mercator's circumſtances, to be leſs jealous than Mercator.

THE END.

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